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ABSTRACT

English department members at Augustana College decided to make writing a college-wide concern. They began by attempting to change the perceptions of the faculty, including that of the English department, which consisted of members trained entirely in literature rather than in composition. The approach to the rest of the faculty began with an explanation of the potential of the reading and writing lab and an invitation to them to attend lab sessions. They were then asked to identify their students with problems and to refer them to the lab. In addition, an English faculty member was sent to a writing institute for a year so that he might return and serve as a consultant to all departments. Next, a workshop was organized for faculty members from various departments to discuss writing theory and curricular change. It included lectures by outside experts, outlines of freshman writing courses, samples of student writing from various departments, and agreement on what makes good writing. Some changes after a year were: writing lab use jumped from 20 students a quarter to 50 students a week, two departments began writing courses and others planned to do so, English department composition course enrollments went up, and a faculty newsletter was created containing notices of recent developments in writing, new courses planned by various departments, and interesting ideas and writing assignments. (TJ)

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Writing as a College-Wide Concern

by

Roald D. Tweet

It was a typical October afternoon in the English Department offices. Herr Weber had been in to complain loudly about having to teach his German students English grammar and mechanics while we freshman rhetoric teachers were hacing the time of our lives discussing the world's great issues, teaching our freshman classes as glorified bull sessions. Nor was Herr Weber alone. No freshman rhetoric teacher ever ventured into the faculty lounge without at least one query from a biology or psychology teacher about why we weren't teaching our students to write--a comment sure to provoke a general murmur from others present about much worse student writing was than it used to be when old Dr. Richter taught composition.

That October afternoon was also high school visitation day, and two sets of parents pushing their reluctant high school seniors ahead of them had actually found their way down to our offices for a visit. We knew what they would ask, and they did: how can our daughter place out of the freshman Egnlish requirement? Only one eager prospective student had appeared: a small squeaky youth who announced that he wanted to be a Writer, managing to capitalize the W as he spoke. Of course, he, too, wanted to by-pass freshman English and get on to something interesting.

These forces of evil surrounding our little Camelot of English were not entirely to blame, I must admit. We English teachers had helped create our little ghetto. On the department walls we had posted the obligatory quote from W. H. Auden: "Thou shalt not commit sociology." We frequently talked about other teachers not being able to write themselves. We responded to the charge that we were not teaching students the kind of writing they needed for other classes or for the world beyond the college by holding up the liberal arts as a model from which most modern writing

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had sunk into jargon and gobbledegook. We complained about those mythical faculty members who assigned term papers but never bothered to read them. (Not all myth, I'm afraid. A senior more daring than wise once showed me a philosophy paper in which he had written right into the text on page 10: "If you are still reading this, you bastard, you can flunk me." He subsequently got a B in the course.)

With typical Puritan introspection from reading too much Hawthorne, we berated ourselves, too, for what had come to be known as "the writing problem" on campus. By this same October afternoon, the freshman English text we had selected the previous May--our 16th new text in 18 years--was already showing signs of rust. Students were not begging to respond to it in writing, nor were they drinking deep of the essays it contained. We were already talking about next May, and a new text, psyching up for the annual spring ritual whose central liturgy is "There's got to be a better way of doing it; next year things are going to be different."

Sound familiar? I suspect I have outlined the state of seige under which many English Departments operate. Between us and other departments there is at best a truce line, perhaps a fence too high to look across. We lived in constant frustration. In spite of the fact that theme grading is one of the most time consuming jobs any discipline has to face, in spite of contantly facing classes of students who have to be there, little of what we did seemed to work. Most of us felt we were able to develop adequate writing skills in our freshman English students, only to have them revert to all their old bad habits as soon as the course was over, even in literature courses they took with us the following quarter. It was as though they had never had freshman English; we could not prove we were doing anything. We could juggle, stand on our heads, and entertain in all sorts of outlandish ways, but freshman English continued to be perceived by students as something to be gotten out of the way--an invention of English teachers to keep up employment.

To be fair, a growing number of faculty were sympathetic to our attempts to improve writing. Several of the newer, younger faculty, especially, had begun to work with student writing in their own courses beyond the correction of spelling errors and mechanical mistakes. Geology was an especially good example. Here field reports and journals were a natural part of what a geologist did, and our new geology teacher had made writing--and sessions on how to write--an integral part of his upper level courses.

The administration, too, was strongly interested in the writing problem, and supported and encouraged changes which would address the problem. In fact, by that October of 1976, our department had become convinced that a large majority of faculty and administration would support an increase in the freshman English requirement from one to two quarters, and that even with a tight budget, they would have approved the addition of three English teachers to the department to staff the new courses.

Such a prospect seemed attractive at first. Had we done so, three more English teachers would have jobs, and I would not be writing this paper. Instead, a series of discussions within the department and with the Dean and President during the winter and spring eventually led us in a different direction, one which we feel will be more valuable. We came to believe that a second freshman composition requirement would be perceived by students (and faculty advisors) as just another hurdle to jump over, one more annoyance on the way to a real education, and that it would be more apt to cut enrollment rather than improve writing. STudentw would get it over with a revert as they always had. We decided that until students came to perceive writing as an emphasis of the entire faculty rather than a strange abberation of the English Department, a natural and necessary component of a college degree, no amount of writing requirement would work. Writing had to become a college-wide concern. We had to alter the perceptions of the faculty before attemptin to change the attitude of the students.

In the fall of 1977 we began to explore ways of working with the entire faculty on the writing problem. First, we realized that among the faculty whose perceptions

needed changing, we were included. We were a typical small college English department in that all of us were trained to teach literature. None of the graduate schools we had gone to had graduate courses in composition, let alone in the teaching of composition. Then, by an irony peculiar to English departments, we had all been baptized into teaching by being given several years of nothing but freshman composition courses.. We became, naturally, the quack doctors of academia, with folk remedies for serious diseases. Why did any administration assume we could teach writing any better than a history or a philosophy teacher?

We frankly had little information on composition theory; most of us taught, I suspect, variations of what we were taught. We were aware that in the past five years a number of new and exciting--and apparently working--developments had taken place in the teaching of composition. We realized that our first problem was to find our for ourselves just what the writing process involved.

We also had to admit that we had little idea of what other disciplines wanted in the way of writing from their students. Did each department value a different kind of writing, or was good writing simply good writing? For years we had taught the research paper as the final effort in freshman English, but we knew there were students who never again had to write the kind of formal research paper we made the students learn. Here, too, we had never taken time to find out whether we were serving the real needs of other departments. Charles Lamb would have been proud of us, but how was the business major doing with what we had taught him? We called ourselves a service department without ever checking to find out what we were serving.

We also decided early in our discussions to work toward an upper level writing requirement, not taught by the English Department, but included as a component in each major the college offered. We wanted to make sure that a student would graduate with a major writing experience in his own field so that he would perceive writing as something other than an English requirement and not feel he had gotten over writing in freshman English. Such a course would be a senior-level, required subject course in each

major, but one in which the material covered and the grade would depend heavily on a writing experience. This might range from a seminar with one major paper to a series of reports on experiments. We knew that such a course could not be forced on other departments from outside by fiat or force, but would have to come from inside, from department members who believed in its importance.

Our approach to the faculty began with the reading and writing lab. This lab had been set up eight years before with $10,000 worth of sophisticated hardware and an average use of 20 students per quarter. The English Department tested entering students, but could do little more than encourage the high risk students to seek remedial help. Few came, fewer lasted, because the lab was viewed as just another invention of the English Department.

To remedy this indifference, we invited department chairman and other facutly, a few at a time, to sessions in the writing lab. We asked these faculty to identify their students with writing paroblems and to send them to the lab. Further, we wanted the faculty member himself to provide the muscle by making his student's grade dependent on satisfactory performance in the lab.. This way, the English Department would not be the bad guy, other faculty would become a part of the writing process, and students might just begin to see that writing was not an exclusive concern of English teachers.

Faculty members were receptive to these sessions, and even though some of them persisted in equating writing problems with spelling and sentence fragments, thed did send an increasing number of students to the lab. The process led to many discussions between English teahcers and other faculty, and raised the general awareness of the writing problem.

A second front in our campaign to improve writing awareness came last spring when a member of our English problem was accepted as a member of the first University of Iowa Institute on Writing, where he is spending the remainder of this year. He has been appointed Director of Writing at Augustana and the administration has agreed

to give him released time when he returns next year to serve as a consultant to those departments who wish to develop writing components and to implement new interdisciplinary writing programs. He will also be an especially valuable resource to the rest of us in the English Department.

Last spring, we set out to consolidate the gains we had created in writing awareness on campus and to develop it further by obtaining a modest grant to hold a two week Workshop on Writing as a College-Wide Concern during June 1978. The grant paid stipends to fifteen key faculty members from fifteen different departments in addition to three members of the English Department who set up the workshop. Discussions and presentations ranged from writing theory to the politics of curricular change.

Professor Richard Lloyd-Jones, Chairman of the English Department at the University of Iowa, led the opening session, and presented, as it turned out, the key idea around which the rest of the workshop focused. He approached writing as a learning process, suggesting that a student has not really mastered a subject until he has written about it, that to learn a subject and to learn to write are part of the same process. Making writing an integral part of learning was the one idea that turned out to be most successful in convincing other faculty to give up valuable class time normally devoted to their subjects in order to spend the amount of time and energy needed for a writing component. Professor Richard Baker, a sociologist from Illinois State University who has spend many years teaching sociology primarily through writing assignments was especially valuable in supporting Lloyd-Jones" suggestions. For many faculty in the workshop, the idea that writing assignments could be more than a duty was exciting.

One of the sessions was devoted to members of the Engish Department carefully outlining their own reshman writing courses, together with a ratinale for each of the assignments. The fact that we did anything at all was a revelation to many of the workshop members. Many of them did not have the slightest idea of what we did in class, and were amazed to learn that we had had students do critical analyses, reports, and other papers of the kind their students claimed they were never taught.

An especially valuable part of the workshop was the sharing of samples of student papers from various areas, as well as samples of the grading handed out by the participants. We used this as a basis for discussing what we meant by good writing. It was comforting to us in English, and a relief to those outside, to find out that we nearly all agreed on what a good paper was. From these discussions we produced a reference chart for use as a basis in grading writing. We have begun to use this in freshman English, and our hope is that it will become a college-wide standard. Many non-English faculty were relieved to discover that they did not have to find x number of spelling errors, comma splices, or fragments to justify a C grade. We did talk, too, about grammar and mechanics as part of the transcription process rather than the writing process.

By the end of the workshop, at a champagne breakfast on the porch of a campus mansion, we had all become a group committed to the writing problem. There was to be no revolution, no coup d'etat, but vote by vote we were confident we were on our way to change.

There are already indications of change. Our reading/writing lab now handles a minimum of 50 students per week. Many of these are faculty referrals from faculty who a year ago did not know the lab existed. But many of the students have begun to come in on their own to seek help. It has dropped the title "remedial" and is used almsot as much by pre-med and pre-law students who are facing major exams or who simply want to become better read ers and writers. The lab staff has gone wholistic; the lab is now a place where study skills are taught, not just vocabular or spelling drill. Writing problems are almost always, buy the time a student reaches college, more than just a writing problem.

One indication of how successful the reading/writing lab has become is its work this past year with 16 high risk students. These students come from poor schools and though they do meet admissions requirements, they are likely to fail. Over the past ten years, statistics showed that 12 of the 16 would not make it through to the winter quarter. All 16 of these students are still here; not one is

on probation. Their two hours per week in the writing lab must take some of the credit (and I must note in passing, that by doing so, the lab has paid for itself. 12 tuitions more than cover the salary and equipment cost.)

The writing lab is open from 7:30 to 5:30 five days a week, keeping a staff of 4 busy. Most important, the lab is no longer perceived by students as a part of the English department, or even a part of the academic faculty. Rather, students see it as a friend and ally against the system; it is in their corner willing to help, not require. STudents know there is someone who will listen, who will celebrate when they get their first passing grade in a theme, who will offer a shoulder to cry on when a mean Englihs teacher slams on that F. But they also know they cannot get by with anything, and that that F is a problmem which must be worked at. The writing lab is the friendliest place on campus, the coffee is always on.

Other things have begun to happen, too. Two departments have begun writing courses for one or two credits: biology and chemistry. A separate writing course has become a requirement in several majors, including public administration and accounting. Last week the Psychology Department announced a senior level seminar paper as a graduation requirement for that major.

The interest in writing around the college is also undoubtedly responsible for a rapid increase in the number of students in our own English Department writing courses. This year we have added three new sections of exposition to handle the increase, an increase consisting mostly of students who want to learn..to write.

We continue to make the writing problem visible in several ways. We publish a writing newsletter for all faculty notifying them of recent developments in writing, new courses by various departments, interesting ideas and writing assignments. We also planned a series of outside speakers who have been coming to campus this year to talk about writing., people like Dixie Goswami of the University of Tennessee, who keep things stirred up. We are planning to publish in book form some of the best samples of student writing in various departments, not as a prize or a contest, but as an indication of what our best students can do.

Of course, we still have students who talk about devout atheists, and virgin forests where the hand of man has never set foot, who write about Many people believe that...when they mean My uncle. Herr Weber still comes in to complain about his German students who don't know what a participle is. And freshman themes still take until two in the morning. But it is, I can tell you, much more fun to be on a campus where writing is a problem shared by at least some faculty outside the English Department.

Teaching writing is hard, there's no way around that, and I suppose it's possible that all our good will may evaporate. On the other hand, we are presently seeking grant money for two new major projects which involve writing across the college, and my hope is that good writing may soon become a good habit at our school.